

FYI

Dave Lane

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## AURORA'S INTERACTIVE MERCHANDISING SYSTEM FACILITATES PLANNING PROCESS

BY HELEN K. KELLEY

A new product from Aurora Casket Company, introduced at last October's NFDA Convention, has begun creating a stir in the funeral service industry. The Family Advisor, a state-of-the-art interactive project designed specifically for funeral service, serves both as an educational tool and a nearly-seamless merchandising system.

As a merchandising tool, Family Advisor allows funeral directors to present preneed and at-need funeral planning to families in a comfortable, relaxed setting. Seated around a custom-designed conferencing center, families can view a multi-media presentation of the funeral home's caskets, services and related products on a color computer monitor. In this manner, the family can ask questions about every aspect of the planning process as the presentation progresses, and the funeral director has the option of answering those questions personally, or using video presentations that address specific issues.

"Family Advisor assists the funeral director in taking the family through all the service and product selections, one by one," says Nancy Koors, Aurora's director of Internet marketing. "The goal is for the funeral director to be able to make all of the arrangements through one streamlined process." In addition, the system also allows funeral directors to customize certain areas of the presentation, such as product descriptions and pricing, to meet their specific needs.

The Family Advisor also facilitates the planning process by educating the families, making them better informed and taking the anxiety out of their decision-making. The system's built-in selection guide helps the family make appropriate selections for their loved one by inquiring about things such as preference for traditional or contemporary style, religious traditions and even color preferences. The selection guide prompts the funeral director to ask questions about these preferences, and based on the answers the family gives, the funeral director can narrow down a selection of caskets, urns or other products to display on-screen. Families also have the option to bypass certain products and services

and get detailed information about the ones in which they're interested.

"Ultimately, the result will be a better informed consumer," explains Chris Barrott, executive vice president of operations for Aurora. "Families are less stressed during the decision making process and eventually will be more satisfied with their selection." For the funeral director, this kind of informed decision-making may result in more revenue potential. With its detailed descriptions and pictures, the system is able to communicate the value of higher-end products. "Hopefully, by incorporating education, the presentation will assist the family in feeling good about a decision to purchase a higher-end product, rather than feeling ripped off," says Koors.

The Family Advisor system can also produce savings for the funeral home. A compact selection system like this can eliminate the need for a selection room — thereby freeing

up that space for other uses — as well as display caskets that represent thousands of dollars in tied-up inventory.

Caskets, services and related products are displayed on a 36-inch full color computer monitor utilizing mixed media; the family views the presentation on the monitor and makes their selections. Funeral homes can choose from four different Family Advisor system packages. The basic Software Hardware Package includes a Gateway PC, 36" monitor and arrangement software; the Multi Media Conference Package includes the Software Hardware package elements, plus a video cabinet, conference tables and chairs; the Arrangement Office Package offers all of the previously mentioned items, along with a cremation urn display cabinet with lighting and a memorial book display cabinet with lighting; and finally, the Selection Room Package offers the same as the Arrangement Office Package, plus a custom casket cabinet with lighting. A fifth package, which is custom-designed for a laptop computer, includes a Gateway laptop, with Family Advisor hardware and software. The furniture, made

The Southern Funeral Director •

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by Steelcase, a leading office furniture supply company, is of fine craftsmanship, has eye appeal and versatility, and can be configured to meet space and budgetary requirements.

One of Aurora's key markets for the Family Advisor is funeral homes that have limited space for a selection room. Funeral homes with multiple locations or satellite offices might also find this system useful, in that they can retain a selection room at one location, while having the interactive system available at their remaining locations.

Larger funeral homes may find that utilizing such a system provides more consistency among its salespeople. "By using the interactive presentation and customizing it for their business, funeral directors can guarantee that all of their arrangers are educating families in the same way with the same information," states Koors. "It's an additional way of ensuring that the family feels confident in their decision."

Since its premier at the NFDA Convention, improvements and enhancements have been made to the Family Advisor. It is currently being test-marketed at four funeral homes, two each in Ohio and Indiana; only one of the four currently has an actual selection room. After the test period, the system will go on the market at large.

Koors notes that a version of the program will be designed for laptop computers as a sales tool. "Sometimes the funeral home's conference room is just not large enough when people bring their entire family in," she explains. "By taking the laptop into

the family's home, you can accommodate more people in their comfortable environment."

Another creative innovation of the Family Advisor is an automatic Internet connectivity feature. This allows the system to dial into Aurora's database and automatically download any new information and inventory selections. If a particular casket or product is out of stock, Aurora will automatically pull it from the funeral director's list of choices so that the item does not show up during

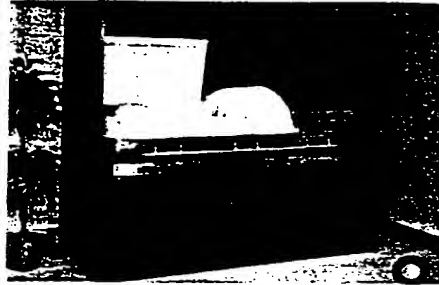
a presentation. The dial-in feature also allows the Family Advisor system to record the family's selections in a database for record-keeping, and will automatically place the orders online to Aurora.

The system's versatility allows it to evolve and stay current with market changes. Once a funeral director purchases the Family Advisor, he will receive upgrades to the system at no additional cost.

As software enhancements are developed, they will be sent to existing customers either on disk or through an Internet download, ensuring that the latest version is in use. "This system was designed to prevent against obsolescence," says Koors. "And customers don't have to worry about constantly upgrading their selection rooms. They have the newest products and services online."

The Family Business Advisor sells in packages starting at \$8,450. For more information about the system, call Aurora Casket Company, (800) 457-1111, or speak to your sales representative.

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